

Wednesday, March 11, 2009

Water system scam shows a growing need for bilingualism in county

by Amber Parcher | Staff Writer

County officials say the recent case of salespeople posing as government employees and going door-to-door to sell expensive water treatment systems illustrates a need for more bilingual employees to reach out to the Hispanic community.

In fact, if OCP hadn't recently hired two Spanish-speaking investigators, the case would have been nearly impossible to look into, said Eric Friedman, the director of the county Office of Consumer Protection.

The case came to Friedman's attention only after Karla Silvestre, the county executive's Latino liaison, heard about it from community members in Gaithersburg. The salespeople spoke Spanish and targeted Spanish-speakers.

Friedman and Silvestre said without that referral, they don't think any of the people who bought the treatment systems would have known to contact the OCP.

"We're not sure that the Spanish-speaking community, or all vulnerable communities, knows about our office as well as they should," Friedman said.

Aldo Aguilar, a Damascus resident who was sold one of the water treatment systems, said he contacted the OCP after he mentioned the strange sale to a friend who worked in the county. The friend then referred him to the OCP. But, he said in Spanish, he would have found the correct county office one way or another once he realized he needed help.

Cases like this have made it absolutely necessary for county offices to reach out to the Hispanic community, county officials said. One of the top ways is to do that is to speak their language, Silvestre said.

"People tend to trust people [who] speak their language," she said. "If they're lost in translation, they're going to be more hesitant."

Rafael Arturo CabelloCabello, who does not speak English, said he went to Spanish-speaking households because he knew his customers would share his language.

It worked, Aguilar said. Aguilar said the fact that the salespeople who came to his door spoke Spanish made him more comfortable with their claims that his drinking water was unsafe. "It gave us confidence," he said.

And although Aguilar said he would have found the OCP on his own, Silvestre said her role as a community liaison is to make it easier for people like him to find help in the county government.

Silvestre said she works closely with the Hispanic community to make sure people who would normally be detached from the government get in contact with the right resource.

"The government has so many services, and it's really hard for people to get a grasp of the wealth of services we offer," she said.

The county executive also has an African and Caribbean liaison, an Asian and Middle Eastern liaison and an African-American liaison, Silvestre said.